

Photographic Literacy: Cameras in the Hands of Russian Authors. By Katherine M.H. Reischl. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. xx, 300 pp. Notes. Index. Illustrations. Plates. Photographs. \$49.95, hard bound. doi: 10.1017/slr.2020.15

It is often claimed that we live in a “digital age,” when in fact it may be more accurate to say that we live in an age where different media, including print and digital, continue to co-exist. Katherine M. H. Reischl’s *Photographic Literacy. Cameras in the Hands of Russian Authors* shows that there are historical precedents for our media hybridity. The title names the program: *Photographic Literacy* tells the story of the relationship between photography and literature—or, more accurately, between photography and authorship—in Russia from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth. In doing so, it mostly avoids common clichés, especially the one whereby that story can only be told as the story of photography’s *representation* in literature. Instead, Reischl tells a more challenging tale, to wit, how from a certain point onward, literature in a certain sense *became* photography. As the author points out, in the Russian (Realist) literary tradition, dominated as it is by towering author figures à la Lev Tolstoi and Fedor Dostoevskii, this development met with formidable obstacles, and it is photography’s threat to the integrity of the author as an autonomous subject that is the focus of her book. Of course, one highly productive solution to this problem, tackled in different ways by the likes of Marshall McLuhan or Jacques Lacan in the late twentieth century, would be to rebuild the subject in the image of photography and other technical media, an undertaking prepared for in so many ways by the historical avant-garde whose “new man” and “new woman” were equipped with cameras that functioned as extensions of their physical bodies. While she does not mention these theories, Reischl does painstakingly reconstruct the multiple anxieties that preceded twentieth century efforts to align media history with the history of subjectivity. Throughout the book, her emphasis is on (literary) production, and that is all for the best because anxieties over the author-subject under threat were far from immobilizing the latter’s creativity. On the contrary, as Reischl richly demonstrates, they enabled the formation of a complex form of authorship for which Reischl uses the shorthand “author-photographer.”

The book comprises four core chapters. In the first, “Tolstoy in the Age of his Technical Reproducibility,” Reischl surveys examples of (portrait) photography in mid nineteenth-century Russia from often innovative angles. For example, she points out that one of the ways in which the “crisis of authorship” occasioned by the increasing availability of photographs was tentatively resolved was through the introduction of copyright law, seen as one way of reconciling the demands of authorship with those of the market. Another memorable discussion concerns a 1861 portrait photograph by Sergei Levitsky—one of the world’s innovators in the area of (portrait) photography—of one of his relatives, Aleksandr Herzen, that subsequently circulated in the form of a lithograph. In that same year, the image was requested

from Herzen by one of his admirers, the painter Nikolai Ge, who then used it as a model for his portrait of Christ in his painting *The Last Supper* (1863). The episode shows with unusual clarity how the “reality effect” of a painted image was increasingly underwritten by the conventions governing (portrait) photography, with the remarkable result that even credible “portraits” of Christ were now becoming a distinct possibility. Such “credibility” is the result of the fact that the increased availability of (portrait) photographs literally changed the way people saw, and this is why, in a way, the most logical continuation of Ge’s method can be found, a few decades after Ge, in Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square*, a painting that shows us *literally* what the camera “sees” (nothing).

In the second, richly illustrated chapter (“The Diffusion of Domesticated Photography”), Reischl considers the role played by the practice of (portrait and domestic) photography by Silver Age writers Leonid Andreev, Vasilii Rozanov, and Maksimilian Voloshin, especially Andreev’s remarkable color photography. As the author demonstrates, in the early twentieth century, when the possession of photographs was already common in Russia, photographs of writers and of their private lives, however staged, not only threatened the institution of authorship, they also helped shore it up. Thus, the frequent placement of Andreev’s portrait on the cover of his books or the circulation of his portraits, in postcard form, among his readers “branded” Andreev as a public figure in ways fundamentally different from the nineteenth century, when writers had remained fundamentally invisible to their readers. As Reischl impressively shows, Andreev, Rozanov, and Voloshin understood well two fundamental truths about photography: first, that the context in which a photograph is placed determines the way in which it is understood; and second, that with the circulation of the photographs of writers among the reading public, the relationship between fact and fiction would never be the same.

Chapter 3, “Microgeography, Macroworld,” is devoted to author-photographer Mikhail Prishvin, an essential member of Russia’s “minor literature” whose work began to attract renewed attention after the publication of his diaries in the late 1980s, and whose purported hostility to mechanical forms of image production, especially film, in the name of authentic *experience* dominated the secondary literature about him for some time. By contrast, Reischl argues that the photographs that accompany Prishvin’s literary writing from the *ocherki* of *The Land of Unfrightened Birds* (1907) on are anything but coincidental to its ambitions and effect, and that Prishvin’s deliberate focus on a dialectical combination of images and text was integral to his goal of fusing the authorial self with nature. And while in these early sketches there is no contradiction between the literary text and the photographs that accompany it, this changes drastically during the 1920s when the *literature of fact* defines both authorship and literature functionally (didactically) rather than subjectively. Sergei Tret’iakov, for one, viewed the author-photographer as a “producer” who actively interferes in the social environment s/he chronicles. Such a perspective could not be more different from Prishvin’s own pre-revolutionary model, based as it is on

the contemplation and observing assimilation of nature and on the camera as a supplementary extension, rather than the enabler, of this process. Small wonder that in the 1934 *History of the Construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal*, an illustration from Prishvin's *The Land of Unfrightened Birds* (1907) is included as an example of the "old" times (as opposed to the "new" Soviet era). In her discussion of Prishvin's own White Sea Canal book and its relationship with time-lapse photography (Eadweard Muybridge) and avant-garde montage (Dziga Vertov), Reischl argues that "his [Prishvin's] rewriting and re-photographing of his land of unfrightened birds transforms the canal project into an embodied experience" (122). As Reischl shows, as an author-photographer, Prishvin strayed as far from the prosthetic body of the avant-garde ("kino-eye") as from Tret'akov's idea of the operative writer-photographer and his immersion in the networks of social production, which is another way of saying that the material aesthetics of Vertov & Co. remained deeply suspicious to Prishvin.

In the fourth chapter, "Look Left, Young Man! The International Exchange of Photo Narratives," Reischl analyzes Soviet photography of the 1930s, notably Ilya Ehrenburg's and Ilya Ilf's photographic reflections of the western world (Paris, in Ehrenburg's case; and the US, in Ilf's) before the background of the photo-series, a popular genre in the Soviet Union and elsewhere that was designed to adapt photomontage for agitational purposes, often through the collage of "before and after" imagery with illustrative text. Where these photospreads function metonymically (as in one example where the model Soviet home stands for the Soviet "family" as a whole), Ehrenburg's often startling snapshots of Paris's urban environment, taken with a Leica camera equipped with a lateral viewfinder that acted like a periscope, appear, Reischl argues, to revert to an older avant-garde model, Vertov's "life caught unawares." One might caution there that the film-based documentarism Vertov developed during the 1920s never presumed that there was a reciprocal relationship between "life" and the camera's ability to capture it *directly*. It is not for nothing that in *The Man with the Moving Camera*, the archive of stills and the cutting table become crucial counter-scenes to the camera-man's filming in the city; "life caught unawares" is a constructive process whose perceptual logic is close to Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*: the spontaneity of "life" is a belated, mediated (cine-) effect produced at the cutting table.

All told, this is a marvelous book whose achievement is the way it teaches us that while the term "author-photographer" names a crucial extension of the literary writer's range of skills—combining two media not commonly associated with each other, writing and photography—it is actually much more than that. First, as Reischl also notes, the author-photographer represents a waystation on the path towards a specific Soviet (Stalinist) subjectivity that is only very inadequately described as "totalitarian." Where that moniker implies a subject immobilized and passive, more recent research, especially with respect to the diary form, has shown that the necessity of adapting to the material and ideological conditions of life in the new Soviet society resulted in often highly productive efforts on the part of the individual to start a process of subject-(re)formation whose origin and focus was not pressure from

above but the subject himself or herself, and that photography, together with (diary) writing, was one way of enabling such a (trans-)formation. The second thing Reischl teaches us lies in the way the “author-photographer” formula flags a newly calibrated relationship between fiction and fact, whereby—as she shows especially in the chapters on Prishvin and Andreev—the alignment of literature with fiction, and photography with fact, becomes progressively untenable.

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To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture. By Eleonory Gilburd. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018. xi, 458 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. \$35.00, hard bound.
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This is a beautifully written book. In *To See Paris and Die*, Eleonory Gilburd tells the story of how the Soviet Union opened its borders—selectively but significantly—to western culture during the Thaw. As Gilburd explains, the cultural riches of the west had a place in the USSR from the start. For the Bolsheviks the west had given birth to literature, art, architecture, and music that rightly was part of the socialist inheritance. In the 1930s, paradoxically during the xenophobia of the Great Terror, the Soviet Union proclaimed itself the home of true, world culture. After Stalin’s death and the termination of mass terror, as well as the anti-cosmopolitanism of the late 1940s, the stage was set for a revitalized and far more extensive engagement with the west.

The Cold War, Gilburd writes, led Stalin’s successors to note the costs of postwar isolationism. Soviet officials realized the extent of American cultural influence in Europe and, to rival it, signed a series of bilateral cultural agreements, undergirded by the concept of “peaceful coexistence.” The Moscow International Youth Festival of 1957 was both an early example and a paragon of the Soviet opening. The Youth Festival existed first as a script; it was “a literary enterprise, a spectacular invention on paper, before it became real” (56). Painters helped to make the plans a reality; “color was the festival’s second name” (102). Filmmakers recorded an event whose “sequences were distinctly cinematic” (102).

Cultural exchange as literature, painting, and film, as well as their reception by readers and viewers: these themes foreshadow the rest of the book. In the 1950s and 1960s, hundreds of American and European novels, paintings, and films arrived in the USSR, to be read and viewed by teachers, librarians, doctors, engineers, and students in Moscow, Leningrad, and far beyond. For Gilburd, the Thaw amounted to the largest episode of cultural westernization in Russian history since Peter the Great. For officials, translators, dubbers, and critics, “culture” was not class-based, but a universal language that expressed universal values. Yet the Soviets made the universal particular; the most universal country on earth, the USSR had a unique claim to understanding the cultural output of other lands. Novels by Ernest Hemingway and